2015
Achievement Awards
Virginia Association of Counties

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2015.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Locality: **Fairfax County**

Program Title: **The More Easily Informed Voter**

Program Category: **Customer Service**

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: **Cameron P. Quinn**

Title: **General Register, Fairfax County**

Department: **Office of Elections**

Complete Mailing Address: 12000 Government Center Parkway, Suite 323, Fairfax, VA 22035

Telephone # 703-222-0766   Fax # _____

E-mail: cameron.quinn@fairfaxcounty.gov

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name: _Robert Rathbun_

Title: _Chief Operating Officer_

Signature: _(signed)_
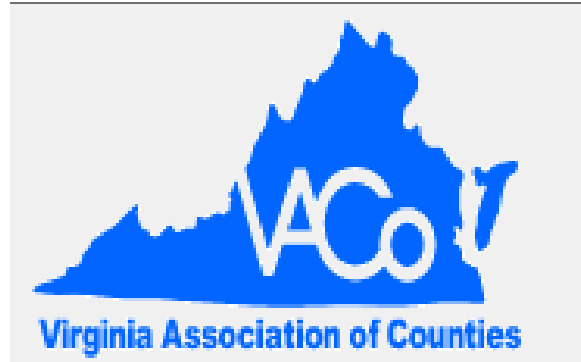
2015 Achievement Awards

The More Easily Informed Voter
Fairfax County, VA

Submitted by:

Cameron P. Quinn

General Registrar, Fairfax County

12000 Government Center Parkway, Suite 323

Fairfax, VA, 22035

703-222-0776

Cameron.Quinn@fairfaxcounty.gov

www.fairfaxounty.gov/elections

The More Easily Informed Voter

Abstract of the Program:

To provide an efficient, enhanced service to the voters of Fairfax County, and to increase staff productivity, the Fairfax County Office of Elections integrated a customized Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) software program with their existing phone system and the statewide secure voter registration database. The result is a simple but powerful system that provides automated, personalized voter information and answers to common questions in both English and Spanish, 24/7/365. In September 2014, Korean was added to the program, with the option of speaking to a Korean-speaking staff member if further assistance was needed. Voters – even those with special needs – now have an additional avenue available to confirm their voter registration status, learn the location of their polling place, and find answers to the most frequently asked election and voting questions. The results have been dramatic: when provided with this option, voters have overwhelmingly chosen to use it.

The Need for the Program:

The Office of Elections receives thousands of calls to request information that is included in material mailed to voters and online. Often these callers are not comfortable, or are unable for various reasons, to use online resources. The calls peak in the final weeks before the election – the same few weeks that staff handle the heaviest load of voter registration applications and absentee ballot requests.

Because accuracy is paramount, it is challenging for staff to analyze applications, input data, and process various applications correctly while answering a high volume of calls. Limited physical office space constrains the number of seasonal or temporary staff that can be added, even if sufficient funding were available. As a result of these limitations, it had not been

uncommon for voters to wait over half an hour for assistance leading up to Election Day. Recognizing that caller wait time was unacceptable, as well as understanding that Fairfax County voters expect state-of-the art technology, the Office of Elections began researching alternatives.

Description of the Program:

In Fairfax County, IVR is becoming one of the foundation programs for enhancing public access to government information, and research confirmed that an automated telephone answering system could be configured to provide our voters with quick and timely answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) as well as handling their individual, personal registration questions automatically. It could also allow them to transfer out of the automated system and speak to staff during the same call, if made within business hours.

By connecting to the Virginia State Board of Elections voter information database, the Office of Elections' application allows voters to securely confirm their voter registration status and polling place. In addition, callers can learn the upcoming voter deadlines and hear answers to ten frequently asked questions, including how to change their name or address and vote absentee. By handling the routine calls in either of the county's two key languages (English and Spanish), the IVR telephone information system allows staff to concentrate on non-routine voter questions, voters whose issues require more personalized attention, or voters who just prefer to talk to a live person. The beauty of the program is that it enables everyone, even those who do not have access to the internet or may have special needs, "to conduct business with the county wherever and whenever it is convenient for the customer," as requested by the Board of Supervisors.

The IVR application was implemented using proprietary software from the county's IVR vendor, Tier Encore, and is carried on 19 lines from an AVAYA county phone system, using a T1 line. The IVR server is a standalone unit in the county's server farm. To confirm and provide information, the IVR uses text-to-speech (TTS) technology to "speak" the callers' voting information, using office staff voice recordings. The software is provided by ScanSoft RealSpeak TTS. IVR enhancements include further integration of Web and IVR technology for public use. Because the IVR system was in place through the Fairfax County Department of Information and Technology (DIT), the elections office incurred no startup costs, except allocating staff time to write, translate, edit and record script. The program requires relatively little on-going support from the telecommunications staff, who trouble-shoot system issues and tweak the program as needed.

Results/Success of the Program:

The IVR system was implemented in August 2013 and success was immediate, even without the improvement being advertised. Thanks to the innovative use of the IVR system, the Fairfax County Office of Elections saw a remarkable reduction in the call volume handled by staff during the fall election season. The IVR program will be invaluable in the presidential election years, when we can anticipate a huge surge in phone calls with voting and registration questions ("Where do I vote?" "Am I registered to vote?") .

Weekly tracking reports show that 394 calls came into the IVR line during the week preceding the November election, with only 25 percent transferred to a staff member for assistance. At an average of five minutes per call, those 394 calls translate into 32 hours of staff phone assistance saved. These hours are critical during the peak election period, when staff is stretched thin and resulted in fewer seasonal staff needed to help handle routine phone calls.

An additional advantage is that by using regular staff we significantly lower the risk of incorrect responses. At the same time, the IVR provided existing staff longer uninterrupted periods to complete time-sensitive and complex administrative tasks in less time, with fewer errors.

The IVR is proving especially helpful to voters with special needs, such as those with sight or other impairments, and those who cannot use or do not have access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone, giving them easy access to important voter information. Additionally, the Fairfax County IVR system allows voters to receive key information over the telephone in either English or Spanish.

The IVR has successfully enhanced customer service in a matter of months, providing critical, timely information to help ensure voters are prepared for Election Day. By taking advantage of the county's existing technology, we were able to introduce a powerful customer-service tool at a very low cost. The use of this tool, coupled with other recent innovations -- online voter registration and the development of a voting information mobile app – are significantly improving the ability of voters to access information when it is convenient for them.